

THE DELIUS MUSIC SOCIETY

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March, 1963:

The main contents of this newsletter will be devoted to an interesting account by one of our committee members Mr. R. B. Meadows of the celebrations at Bradford.

Owing to staff problems of the agency and the severe winter, we have been unable to get this letter out earlier. Our most sincere apologies.

After the Mass of Life at the Albert Hall the gentlemen of the press again divided in the expected fashion:

For: William Mann - The Times
Andrew Porter - Financial Times
Noel Goodwin - Daily Express
Felix Aprahamian - Sunday Times

Anti: Martin Cooper - Daily Telegraph
Colin Mason - Guardian

On the Fence: Robert Henderson - Sunday Telegraph
Ed Tracey - Sunday Observer.

As for the attendance figures at the Albert Hall, we have now learned that they were approx. 5,000. (For Information: the seating capacity of the Festival Hall is 1,800).

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE BRADFORD FESTIVAL.

Many members of our Society were unable to be at Bradford for the Delius Festival in March and April. As these concerts were probably the most important events of the centenary year celebrations, this account is offered mainly as a recollection of the playing under Rudolf Kempe, which will since have become familiar to a wider audience through his London concert devoted to Delius on October 29th.

Kempe cannot have had much previous experience of conducting this music. News spread before the first concert that he had insisted on "clean scores". The musicians would start again from what the composer wrote, without the Beecham phrasing and expression marks, the re-arrangement and clarification, which made possible most "authentic" performances of the last 50 years. That the incomparable Sir Thomas Beecham should be gone from us has left a slight consolation, for other conductors whose performances of Delius are no longer completely overshadowed. In earlier years they also faced the hazard of a trenchant epistle from the composer at Grez, who was an assiduous gramophone and wireless listener, to his own music. In an atmosphere now less inhibited, the impact on Delius's music of a conductor of Kempe's standing is all the more exciting.

I missed the chamber music recital, but attended all three orchestral concerts at St. George's Hall and also A Village Romeo and Juliet at the Alhambra Theatre. Kempe conducted what is now his own orchestra, The Royal Philharmonic, musicians hand-picked by Beecham with an eye to performance of the music he particularly admired, the woodwind surely for their sensitive tone-colour in Romantic music, especially Delius. It was reassuring to notice, as the orchestra took their seats, that although there had been changes in the string department the familiar principals were nearly all still there, most notably Terence MacDonagh, oboe, and Jack Brymer, clarinet, the vital and distinctive voices in a Delian sound pattern that one has grown to cherish during the 16 years of this orchestra's existence.

The first concert opened with a shock, perhaps almost as powerful a shock as contemporary accounts recalled by Beecham say this same work occasioned in Hereford Cathedral at its first performance, during the Three Choirs Festival of 1909. A Dance Rhapsody No.1. began tripping along in haste quite foreign to its accustomed gait. The kaleidoscopic variations sped on without a lingering moment, until the slow penultimate variation, the emotional peak of the work, described in the programme notes, "in which a solo violin soars over ravishing harmonies in muted strings, a magic episode unique in all music". Here the solo violin had difficulty in articulating the notes, so relentless was the accompaniment. It was not, for me, a beguiling performance. And yet the work sounded more coherent than it usually does. There were no awkward joins between episodes. The last variation of all, which must go fast, seemed for once an integral part of the rhapsody. In defence of Kempe's treatment, let us admit, the piece is after all a dance.

Sea Drift was a revelation, this time wholly satisfying. The baritone soloist plays an anguished soul, whose part is now and then barely audible amid choral interjections and the subdued power of a large orchestra. Yet the worst drawback in almost every performance is the deliberately under-emphasised orchestral contribution. Sea Drift is a tone poem about the sea, and the sound of the sea is in the orchestra. Does not the opening irresistibly recall Fingal's Cave? Thomas Hemsley is a baritone with a glorious big voice. Kempe's skill at Covent Garden in securing the singers' audibility against a discriminating but fully adequate background of Wagnerian orchestral splendour has been one of the marvels of post-war opera in London. This unique combination of talents at Bradford gave the best performance of Sea Drift I have heard. A whole flood of light was shed on the curiously uneven passage from bar 314, "O, madly the sea pushes upon the land", to bar 330, "high and clear I shout my voice over the waves", which Kempe and the orchestra transformed into a Jeux de Vagues quite new to my experience. It was as though the

performance had been conceived orchestrally and the voices then perfectly blended, instead of orchestra accompanying singers. There is reason to think that Delius would have preferred it this way.

In a Summer Garden never got into focus. The sound was vivid, but one missed the animated tranquillity of a siesta. There is, indeed, a climax in the work; not, however, a climax that should sound like an exciting episode in some knightly adventure. The Song of the High Hills stirred from the local choirs a full and uninhibited tone, the peculiarly northern and open choral sound. There may be here a little-recongnised "genuine tradition" of Delian vocalisation. These were the choirs that the composer knew in the days of his youth.

The second concert began with one of Delius's few safe works, the Nocturne, Paris, which most conductors can bring off, with a capable orchestra. In the Violin Concerto, Raymond Cohen was soloist, having handed over leadership of the orchestra for the evening to John Ronayne. At the lecture preceding the concert there was some discussion whether or not this concerto is well laid-out for the violin. Professional violinists are said to have dismissed the solo part as ungratefully written; from Beecham the opposite verdict is quoted. With the death of Sammons and the retirement of Pougnet, Cohen is the only violinist with this concerto in repertoire. A wider circle will now have heard him in London and can judge whether Cohen, in his turn, succeeds in making the music sound more than an intermittently charming rhapsody with orchestra.

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"Brigg Fair" is another of the few large works by Delius in which one is used to hearing a variety of conductors. No-one caresses that perfect "murmur of the English countryside" intermezzo more bewitchingly than Sargent at his best. Kempe's performance was carefully shaped, but left the feeling as elsewhere in these programmes that the orchestral soloists were being kept on a tighter rein than one remembers under Beecham, where their infinitely flexible phrasing had an air at times almost of improvisation. Felix Aprahamian, in illustrating his lecture before the concert, played the pre-war Beecham recording of "Brigg Fair", in which the final oboe solo by Goossens lingered to heavenly length, perhaps the limit even of Sir Thomas's latitude, as he sounds appreciably brisker with MacDonagh in post-war recordings. Some works of Delius will stand extremes of waywardness. "Brigg Fair" is apparently one of them.

The "North Country Sketches" are regarded as difficult to bring off in performance, not because in "Autumn" Delius is reminiscent of Debussy at his cloudiest, or because the stark and icy sonorities of "Winter" are hard to play (they are easier than they sound), but because in the "March of Spring" it is impossible to get all the notes in. This is one of the numerous places where orchestral players find Delius unrewarding. Their parts cannot be heard. So, one understands, it was at Bradford, with playing from clean scores. The Beecham revision simplifies and renders audible. For all that, Kempe's performance, to my ear, sounded completely successful in capturing the atmosphere of these delightful, but neglected, nature sketches, which may well refer to northern countries in general rather than Yorkshire in particular.

The third concert was again largely choral. "Songs of Farewell" had come as a stirring surprise at Sargent's London concert on January 29th this year. A product of the unique Fenby - Delius co-operation at Grez, it is altogether more taut and spare than Delius's usual manner. Perhaps there was more of Eric Fenby in the fashioning than he has modestly allowed himself to admit. Throughout the work there is a firm strength and vigour, of which Delius's music elsewhere gives only rare hints, but which the biographies unanimously agree the man possessed.

"Appalachia" is a key composition, about which admirers of Delius most sharply disagree. Our Swansea member, Lyndon Jenkins, and I found ourselves in the same kind of dispute after the Bradford concert as Fenby and Heseltine at the Delius festival of 1929. (We also take opposite sides over the Violin Concerto). This is mentioned as indication that there must be more than one species of Delius lover, a circumstance from which the composer's stature may possibly derive some support in present day critical climates. It is therefore the opinion of one who deeply admires the piece, that in Kempe's hands "Appalachia" was played almost as beautifully and kept flowing more cogently than in the best performances by Beecham, with whom it was evidently a favourite.

Delius' orchestral showpiece, on a Straussian scale, is "Eventyr". Kempe and his virtuoso orchestra made the most of this box of tricks, apart from its chiefly notorious feature. (So far from any fresh artifice to cope with the problem of wild shouts demanded in the score, there was no shouting at all). The concert ended with a disappointment. No-one on the platform sounded reconciled to "Songs of Sunset". Dowson's poems are over-ripe. Music of genius has been known to surmount inferior works. Here the total effect is cloying, all the more so in contrast with "Songs of Farewell". Yet Beecham held a high opinion of the work. One must await the opportunity to hear it again.

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There is little to add about the "Village Romeo and Juliet", since the Sadlers Wells production first seen at Bradford has been revived in London and on tour. Orchestrally all was not complete enchantment (many of the musicians may never have played a bar of Delius in their orchestral careers), but Meredith Davies ensured a sensitive performance, and nothing can efface the delight of having experienced this heart-breakingly beautiful music in association with surprisingly effective drama on the stage.

Bradford received the concerts enthusiastically, with an optimum attendance at the first. There were a few seat purchasers after the style of "I don't know any of the music, but our Molly's in the choir". Lord Boothby fired heavy broadsides at anti-Delius critics and was well reported in the newspapers. The fascinating exhibition of Delius manuscripts, photographs, paintings and personal effects was on show for some weeks in his native city and afterwards transferred to the Royal Festival Hall in London.

Every item of music chosen for the festival was a large work and it has been possible to write something about each. There were no pot-boilers in Kempe's programmes. These performances have made it clear that there is room for more than one convincing interpretation of the music. Kempe does much to strengthen the structural effect in Delius and through previous restraint to unleash his orchestral forces more effectively at the climaxes (another lesson from Ring conducting), where Delius is usually at his weakest, the orchestral sound tends to coarsen and the composer seems to beat the air in vain. The balance of voices and orchestra was at times breathtakingly good. How wonderful it would be to hear Kempe in a Delius opera.

"It is hard to believe that we have heard the last of Frederick Delius", wrote a Sunday newspaper critic after the Bradford festival. Looking ahead one can expect more concerts. If common sense prevails they will not consist entirely of Delius. No composer, even the greatest, goes well for long entirely by himself.

Encouragement of young conductors to play the music, and infiltration of concert programmes, is more than ever desirable. Some of Delius's big compositions are virtually unknown, for example the 'Cello Concerto, the Double Concerto, the Requiem.

The last work is with the orchestra. "Tommy used to love playing Delius and we grew fond of it too". Most important for the living survival of music is an affection among instrumentalists and a tradition of the way it should be played.

Advertisements: The Chairman of the Society is anxious to re-acquire a recording of the Beecham 'Mass of Life' (Philips or Columbia) at a reasonable price. A 3½ i.p.s. tape might be considered. Please write to:

David Simmons, Esq.,
119 Constantine Road,
N.W.3.

The Society is anxious to acquire a filing cabinet for the storage of its growing collection of documents, cuttings, letters etc. Offers please to the Hon: Sec:

David Simmons
(Chairman)